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## EDITORIALS

### A step backward

One of the few Americans who hasn't gotten President Reagan's message that the government ought to get off our backs seems to be his own attorney general, William French Smith.

Lately, Smith has been busy tampering with the Freedom of Information Act—the law under which anyone can request documents from a government agency and, if he is refused them, sue the government for their release.

Because of the Freedom of Information Act, bureaucratic skulduggery has become a lot harder to hide—particularly since 1977 when all

federal agencies got a Carter administration directive to hand over documents without a legal battle unless publication of the information in them would be “demonstrably harmful”.

Now, Smith has cancelled that directive and ordered the agencies to fight freedom of information suits whenever they have any technical grounds for doing so.

That's a clear signal to the bureaucrats to keep as much information under wraps as possible.

On top of that, Smith wants to rewrite the Freedom of Information Act to tighten it up. There's even talk of exempting the CIA and FBI from its provisions completely.

So far as we know, there's not a single solid piece of evidence that the Freedom of Information Act has ever interfered with CIA or FBI operations. But there have been plenty of well-documented cases where bureaucrats have wrapped themselves in “the national interest” to cover up fraud or incompetence.

Nobody argues that defense secrets, for example, should be made public. But throughout history, concealment in government has always led to abuse of power.

For that reason, we strongly urge President Reagan to call Mr. Smith in and tell him to stop fooling with the people's right to know.